

McCafferty, James

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OBSERVATIONS.

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I am quite rightly asked by David Powell, Mobility Officer, Hertfordshire, to point out that the organiser of the MoBA London Colney Conference was David Mumford. It was incorrectly stated in MOBILITY NEWS Number 35 that David Powell was the organiser, and apologies are due to him for any embarrassment this might have caused. Nevertheless credit is certainly due to David, and also to Mobility Officer Rosalind Dix, for their splendid work in assisting with Conference liaison and transport.

I apologise for the late delivery of recent issues of MOBILITY NEWS to some members, this was due to a duplication and omission in the mailing lists, a fault now rectified. However, should a reader still find himself lacking any back-numbers, drop me a line and I will send on the missing copy(ies). Please also let me know promptly of any address corrections, and if you are receiving MOBILITY NEWS in the wrong medium, i.e. inkprint instead of braille, or vice versa.

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MY MOBILITY BEFORE AND AFTER TRAINING - SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS.

- by James McCafferty.

(The author is employed as a transcriber with the Scottish Braille Press in Edinburgh. He is a trained long cane user and is involved with the current trials of the Sonicguide Mark 2).

When I left the Royal Blind School in July 1971 I was invited to take part in their programme of mobility training which was due to begin at the start of the new term in September. This proved to be no problem as I had, prior to leaving school, obtained a post at the Scottish Braille Press which is, metaphorically speaking, on the School's doorstep. Previous to any training in mobility I had considered myself mobile; I travelled regularly between Edinburgh and my home in Glasgow most weekends and, in the main, got there without any serious mishap and felt therefore, that I was a dab hand at the game. I had for some time been tired of creeping along in the shadow of buildings like a mediaeval footpad with the aid of a symbol cane, so the prospect of being trained to use the long cane appealed to me. Like many blind people I had heard the disquieting rumours which were and still are going the rounds regarding the long cane. As the starting date of my course approached I became more and more sceptical about the whole idea, but was eventually persuaded by my parents that by going on the course I certainly would have nothing to lose and possibly a great deal to gain. In the end common sense prevailed and I began my training as planned.

I was delighted to learn that the long cane is tailor made, and was greatly impressed by the fact that when travelling the cane is always one step ahead of the user. Also the user travelled in the centre of the pavement and could therefore step out more briskly and with increased confidence. I looked forward to adopting this new style of foot travel.

However the first few lessons of my course proved tedious and boring as they were conducted in the school building which I knew like the back of my hand. They continued in one of the Edinburgh University buildings and this proved to be more of an ordeal, but it was not long before I had progressed to the residential outdoor areas near the school. I soon found that from a personal point of view the advantages of the long cane far outweighed those of the symbol cane. I felt, though, that the training course should be geared more to suit the individual; for example if he was found to be mobile within the first few lessons, the rest of the indoor programme could be missed out. Or equally, if a congenitally blind person

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was found to be mobile before any mobility training then the preliminaries could perhaps be reduced accordingly.

About halfway through my course I heard from Mr Patrick Cave-Browne, my instructor, that Walter Thornton, OBE, was coming to the school to speak to the present group of trainees on the subject of mobility. He came early in November and told us something of his long cane training. It was not until later that I found out that he was wearing a head-mounted Ultrasonic device - the appearance of which he described. He allowed each of us in turn to have a look at the aid, but when I asked if I could try it out for myself, my request was politely but firmly refused. Mr Thornton said that I would get no real benefit from this as the aid had been adapted to suit his own personal requirements. This device was called a Binaural Sensory Aid, or, more simply, Sonic Spectacles.

Later that day when I went for my usual long cane lesson I learned of the evaluation trials of these Spectacles which was at that time taking place at the National Mobility Centre in Birmingham. I was told of how St Dunstan's was currently training a certain number of people in the use of the aid and that Mr Thornton had asked for myself and another of the trainees to attend the next training course which was due to start at the beginning of December. We arranged for a meeting with Mr Bradley, the Manager of the Scottish Braille Press, the following afternoon to ascertain whether I would be given time off work to attend the course. He was very enthusiastic about the whole idea but said that as I was under training the final decision was not his. He would have to approach the Department of Employment as it was they who were ultimately responsible for me during training. After a certain amount of haggling permission was finally granted. Before Mr Thornton's lecture in Edinburgh my knowledge of the Sonic Specs had been almost non-existent. What, then, I wondered, was in store for me in the Midlands?

I duly arrived in Birmingham at the end of November. The preliminaries which led up to the training were not tedious and boring as previously, but fascinating. My first day at the National Mobility Centre presented what was thought to be an insurmountable problem - Nature has unfortunately given me a rather large head and it was found that the standard model of the aid did not comfortably fit. Eventually an aid was found which would serve as a temporary measure. Letters were sent to America to find out whether or not they had a larger spectacle frame in stock, but it was not until a week or two after the end of my training that this arrived in Britain. As training proceeded I became more and more enthusiastic; the whole venture was for me new and exciting. During one exercise, Mr Peter Ryding, the instructor responsible for my tuition, erected a number of wooden posts at varying points on a car park. The object of the exercise was to walk up to and grasp each one of these posts between thumb and forefinger. I was surprised and delighted when I found that I could do this after some practice. Quite often I am asked by people "How effective is the aid?" I always quote the above exercise and its successful outcome as it illustrates exactly just how effective the aid is. Perhaps the fact that the posts in question were only one inch in diameter astonishes them more than anything. Also, if circumstances allow, I point out various landmarks such as iron railings as we pass. I find that this tactic can sometimes leave them speechless.

I enjoyed especially the part of the training which took place in shopping centres. I soon found out that one had constantly to be on the alert if one wishes to cope adequately with passers-by and the various objects of street furniture which are encountered. The aid brought home to me something of what the seeing pedestrian had to cope with when walking along a busy street. When wearing the aid one is much more aware of the people around and can easily avoid, partially at least, being buffeted about by them. My first impression was that the aid would only be as good as an obstacle sensor, but as I progressed with it I gradually found myself becoming more aware of my surroundings. I found that I would suddenly stop





in my tracks to pause and examine a signal by touch as soon as it came into close range. Soon I found that I could not help but take in my surroundings as I had imagined any seeing person to do when walking along a street. I have continued to do this since, and now consider the aid an environment as well as an obstacle sensor.

Since my return from Birmingham I have travelled up and down the country speaking at meetings of and for the blind. I have often been disheartened to find that the main criticisms of the Sonic Spectacles have come from blind people themselves and from a few of 'The Old School' who still wield a great deal of power in matters connected with the blind and their welfare. Perhaps I expect too much, but it seems to me strange to find one's enemies amongst one's supposed allies. The most favourable response to the aid has come from the general public. Quite often when I am being shepherded across a busy road I am asked about it; finding that the person or persons are willing to stand on the pavement after having crossed me over the road while I explain its functions. Sometimes I am asked "Is that a hearing aid you are wearing?" Or, if I am with someone, he is asked: "Is your friend deaf?"

Another disquieting fact, again in the field of blind welfare, is that many damaging things are said with regard to the Sonic Spectacles. For example, at a Summer School for Social Welfare Officers for the Blind held in Scotland some years ago, it was stated by some 'knowing' person that the aid was unacceptable cosmetically and that no consideration whatever had been given to the cosmetic appearance of the aid during development. I am not so narrow-minded as to reject all criticisms regarding the aid; in fact I welcome them so long as the critic has the very necessary facts with which to back up his statement. The so-called 'criticism' I mentioned above is, to anyone who has had the pleasure and privilege of using the aid, complete and utter nonsense. It should never be forgotten that the aid produced at the time of the evaluation trials was meant only as a prototype. Whether this is or is not cosmetically acceptable must be left for each individual to decide for himself.

Let me point out here that the designer of this equipment is highly respected in the field of electronics and did produce another mobility aid some years ago. As for present cosmetic suitability, thought was given to this question - the designer himself wears 'ordinary' spectacles and is a sighted person. He appreciated at the outset that the device would receive some criticism, but the aim was to test the prototype model 'in the field'. The design was purely a general one as exactly who would eventually use these aids was not known at the time. Such research and experimentation is costly, and to have dealt with it on an individual basis would have been even more expensive. Let us give credit where credit is due; after all, it is through such people's efforts and skills that progress is made, not only in mobility but in many other aspects of daily living, education, rehabilitation and the like. Perhaps only a percentage of blind persons will benefit from using sophisticated equipment, but these are steps in the right direction, and I for one appreciate the new dimension given to me as I journey through a sighted world.

I use the Sonic Spectacles and long cane when walking to and from work and also in unfamiliar areas in both Edinburgh and Glasgow. For me the combination of long cane and spectacles is a good one. I was, as I have stated earlier, mobile before I received any form of mobility training, but as a result of being trained in the use of both aids I have become much more confident, a very necessary essential if one wishes to utilise one's mobility skills to the full. Before training I was very sceptical of travel outside my known area, but since have become more eager to travel anywhere in the country.





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